



Gongwer News Service, Inc.
GONGWER

Volume #43, Report #207, Article #06 --Tuesday, October 26, 2004

Reprinted with permission

PRISON FUNDING LOW PRIORITY FOR MICHIGAN RESIDENTS

Michigan residents see prison spending as the lowest priority among six different taxpayer funded services, with primary education seen as the highest priority, according to poll released Tuesday by the Citizens Alliance for Prisons and Public Spending. The alliance wants to translate the public opinion into an overhaul of the state's parole system that they said could save the state just under \$150 million.

The survey, conducted by EPIC-MRA in September, showed public support for focusing state funding on crime prevention, rather than prison terms. Nearly 80 percent of the people surveyed preferred early childhood education as a means of crime prevention, while only 55 percent said they favored long prison terms.

Across the board, the survey showed that people would favor some reform in the prison and parole system that would reduce the amount of prisoners in the state, generally by making the decision to put a prisoner on parole more common.

"We need to improve the process," said Barbara Levine, the executive director of the prisons and public spending alliance. "Prisoners should get released after serving the minimum unless there's a good reason to keep them in."

Ms. Levine said since the parole board changed in 1992 from largely being corrections officers to being appointed officials, the rate of paroles has declined from about 70 percent to closer to 50 percent. "There's no evidence that this keeps people safer," she said.

By the alliance's numbers, about 7200 prisoners could be safely released, saving the state about \$145 million. Ms. Levine said many of the prisoners are either too old or didn't commit serious enough crimes in the first place to be considered a threat if they're released.

Ms. Levine did acknowledge the possibility that releasing more prisoners might increase the risk of a few of them committing future crimes, but she said that is no different than what happens now, and it's not worth incarcerating the many to weed the few out of society. "All you can do is expect the parole board to make the decision with the best information available," Ms. Levine said.

Russ Marlan, a spokesperson for the Department of Corrections, said there is no presumption of parole in state law. Persons are only to be paroled if the state is reasonably assured they are not a threat to society on their return, he said.

The state has been focused on reducing prison population, and in 2003 saw the first decline in 10 years, Mr. Marlan said. Plus the state has already closed two prisons and will close a third within a month when the Western Wayne women's center is merged into the Ypsilanti women's prison.

"We agree that prison alternatives are important and we are finding those and using those," he said. The department is also very involved in efforts to prepare prisoners for re-entry into society to help cut down on recidivism, Mr. Marlan said.

Ms. Levine said the changes the alliance is suggesting would need to be legislative, and in addition to releasing most prisoners after their minimum sentence is finished, the plan would also avoid sending parole violators back to prison for any time if the violation wasn't a crime.

The survey showed there would be public support for the alliance's ideas. Of the people polled, 75 percent said they'd support paroling after the minimum sentence and 72 percent said they'd prefer that parolees not be sent back to prison for minor violations.

The survey was conducted in mid-September of 610 people, and has an error rate of 4 percent.